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Italy election: how populist Five Star Movement is wrecking government hopes for the mainstream

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Italy faces an election on March 4 – and, after a long decade of austerity and economic difficulties, a strong possibility of further political paralysis. Neither the centre-left, the centre-right, or the populists are likely to command a majority in parliament. Establishing a functioning government won't be easy, and its make-up will depend on which parties are prepared to put aside their differences and form an alliance.

The populist Five Star Movement (M5S) exploded onto the electoral scene in the 2013 general election, arresting the see-saw alternation between centre-left and centre-right majority governments that had been tentatively established in the 1990s. The vote produced a hung parliament, forcing the two traditional parties to work together in a centrist “grand coalition” to keep M5S out of office.

Now, M5S, despite recent allegations of corruption, is even stronger. It's likely to emerge from this election as the largest party. But it looks unlikely to secure enough of a majority to govern alone and it continues to refuse to form coalitions with other parties.

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Left-Centre	Centre-Left	Centre	Neither Left nor Right	Centre-Right	Right-Centre	Right
<i>Free & Equal</i>	<i>Democratic Party</i>	<i>Europe-Democratic-Centre</i>	<i>Five Star Movement</i>	<i>Forza Italia</i>	<i>Northern League</i>	<i>Brothers of Italy</i>
6.1%	21.9%	3.5%	27.8%	16.3%	13.2%	4.8%
TOTAL CENTRE-LEFT: 31.5			TOTAL: 27.8	TOTAL CENTRE-RIGHT: 34.3		

Statistics from the February 16 Demos opinion poll, organised by party and political spectrum. Author provided

A collapse in support of the two pivotal parties of the centre-left and centre-right means that neither look likely to be able to form a government either. The Democratic Party under former prime minister Matteo Renzi has sunk from 25% of the vote in 2013 (and an astounding 40.8% of the vote in the 2014 European elections) to 21.9% in polls today. Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, on the centre right, has collapsed from 21.5% in 2013 to 16.3% today. Both parties are suffering from splits and fragmentation, which have weakened the coalitions they lead.

A new system

Faced with this decline, it's not surprising that, in 2017, Renzi and Berlusconi brought the combined parliamentary strength of their parties together to pass an electoral reform that seemed designed to offset M5S's electoral popularity by limiting its seat gains.

The new electoral system (the *rosatellum* – after Ettore Rosato, the Democratic leader in the Chamber of Deputies who first proposed the new law) is a “mixed” system (part “first-past-the-post” and part proportional). It favours those parties willing to ally together behind single candidates to prevent splitting their vote. It also gives an advantage to those parties that are territorially concentrated, such as the Democratic Party (in the central regions) and the Northern League (in the north). M5S, which opposed the electoral reform, has no natural coalition allies and does not yet have a strong presence at local or regional levels.

This electoral engineering will nevertheless come at a cost. It increases the likelihood that none of the parties or coalitions will reach the 40% threshold of the vote that is likely to be necessary to secure a parliamentary majority. This has resulted in a feverish election campaign, dominated – not by debates about policies – but by speculation over possible post-election coalitions. Even an anti-establishment M5S-Northern League alliance is being touted as a possibility.



'You can have Sardinia, we'll have Sicily...' Degl'Innocenti/EPA

All of this matters not just to Italy but to Europe. A decade after the eurozone crisis began, the Italian economy is still in recovery. Its sheer size and significance to the eurozone remains a concern to the European Union, which has demanded greater fiscal discipline and reforms to encourage growth and improve productivity. That needs effective government – and one supportive of the EU.

Yet, there is a rising tide of euroscepticism in Italy, fuelled by M5S and years of perceived EU-imposed austerity. Forza Italia, the Northern League and M5S have all toyed with the idea of withdrawing Italy from the euro, meaning only the Democratic Party has unequivocal pro-euro credentials. Yet, even under prime ministers from that party (Matteo Renzi, Paolo Gentiloni), the Italy-EU relationship has become testy and fractious. Governments have become less willing to be the “good European” if it is seen to involve imposing more austerity on an unwilling population.

Overall, the state of play makes for a potent mix. The 2013 parliamentary and presidential elections produced a “perfect storm” and Italy ended up, for some time, without a prime minister, government or president. This time, fortunately, the president is not up for election – and it will be his responsibility to appoint a prime minister capable of governing with a parliamentary majority. The road ahead is however still fraught with uncertainty.

The new electoral system increases the importance of post-election manoeuvring by the parties, and will determine whether a repeat grand coalition government is needed (and possible) to keep out the extremes, or whether Italy will take a step into the unknown with some kind of anti-EU populist governing alliance. Europe will be watching closely.

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